



LIFE WITHOUT SUMMER

by Lynne Griffin

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ST. MARTIN'S GRIFFIN

*A
Reading
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Selection*



A Conversation with Lynne Griffin

How did you arrive at the idea for *Life Without Summer*?

I was working on another novel when the idea for *Life Without Summer* came to me. From day one I knew the first line and the last line of the story, and they've never changed. I also knew right from the beginning who was responsible for the accident. Though I did get early feedback that this would be a difficult approach, I never wavered in my commitment to tell the story as it came to me.

What do you say to readers who feel it's too hard to read about the death of a child?

I respect readers and the choices they make about spending time with characters dealing with tragic life events. That said, I've always found literature a therapeutic escape for coping with my fears, handling the *what ifs* that may plague me. Though I've never lost a child, I admit to being gripped by the fear that it could happen to me, and I've taken solace in wonderful classics like *A Separate Peace*, *Death Be Not Proud*, and *Ordinary People*, to name a few. (See the author's recommended reading list to find out more.)

I've had my own grief work to do over the years; I lost my father when I was fifteen and my mother when I was forty. As a professional who's taught classes and counseled parents and children about healthy grieving, I've always been struck by the choices people make related to the loss of a loved one—the healthy and unhealthy ways grief work gets done.

In truth, I believe *Life Without Summer* isn't just a story about losing a child; it's so much more than that. It's about the choices people make when faced with unbelievable pain. It's about what really holds a marriage together when it's tested. What I tried to do with the novel was to examine what tragedy does to all kinds of

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relationships. If they start off strong—or don't—what happens? Why do some people thrive after a loss and find true purpose while others don't come out of it stronger?

***Life Without Summer* has a unique structure. Why did you choose to tell the story this way?**

I told it in two voices because I wanted to give readers an up-close and very personal look at not one but two distinct paths toward grieving a loss. I chose first-person accounts, by both Tessa and Celia, since this is the most intimate point of view for storytelling. I didn't want to leave any distance between the characters and my readers. I also chose an epistolary, or letter/journal-ing, format because I felt it would be quite personal to glimpse inside these women's diaries. My point-of-view choice and the novel's structure meant that at times the story became raw, yet it was very important to me to show an honest look at the process of moving in and out of the grief experience. I wanted to give readers a true sense of what it feels like to embrace or reject healing.

It was a challenge to take on the literary principle in which each story echoes the other until they ultimately converge, but I love structure in all aspects of my life so it was fun to push myself as a writer in this way.

Tessa and Celia handle their grief so differently. Which character's story do you connect with the most?

Honestly, I connect with each woman's story, but for different reasons. I really get Tessa's fierce, edgy way of coping. I'm a bit intense myself, so I understand why at times she goes for shock value. Celia says at one point, "Tessa was a staircase of emotion, one minute up, the next minute down." I too am sensitive and emotional. I respect these personality traits and don't shy away from those who express their emotions in big ways.

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As for Celia, I have a lot of compassion for her. I can see how easily a woman torn apart by loss might make a few missteps, suddenly finding herself on a road she wouldn't be on if grief hadn't toyed with her sensibilities. Celia even says to Tessa in one session: "Women often take different roads toward healing after a loss ... just be careful not to get so far ... that you can't find your way back." I have great empathy for her inability to take her own advice. It's one thing to know the right thing to do, it's another entirely to do the right thing, especially in a situation like hers.

What aspects of your career as a family-life expert have informed your fiction?

I've been a family-life expert for more than twenty years. There's so much about my work in counseling parents, observing children, and teaching educators about families that I use in writing fiction. In many ways, my knowledge of human behavior is *the* vital ingredient for writing good stories. When I'm creating characters I use what I know about personality and temperament research to be sure each person has the proverbial *it* factor. I don't focus on the physical traits, though sometimes those can help. I don't *like* certain characters because they're nice, either. In fact, whether I'm reading or writing, I like my characters to be deeply flawed. To be honest, the more flawed, the more I seem to like them. For me, character likability comes with a tight connection between plausibility of behavior and empathy. When a character acts in a way I personally object to, morally or otherwise, I can cast judgment aside if I can identify with what he or she did, or understand his or her motivation. Believability of plot rests on whether or not a character would actually do



what she's done. As a writer, I'm committed to this element of craft and I edit relentlessly until I've achieved likability; it's that important to me.

Given my work with families and my desire to capture family life in authentic ways, there's no shortage of seeds from my work that I can use to inform my writing. Anton Chekhov called them "little particulars." Right there in my everyday life are organic details that give genuineness to the stories I create.



Jerry Bauer

About the Author



“Making Hope’s Acquaintance”

An Original Essay by the Author

*“I’ve been
known to let
what ifs get the
better of me.”*

It was early on a Monday in January. My flannel nightgown and plush robe weren’t warming me to the idea of getting ready for school. It was still dark outside when I heard the knock at the back door. Being fifteen, it took me a minute to figure out there could be no good reason for my father’s friend from work to be standing there at six thirty in the morning. His tears seemed sincere, but I remember screaming at him, telling him he was a horrible man for playing this terrible joke on me, telling me my father was dead. *He had a heart attack on his business trip*, he’d said. My mother, who’d been convinced to take a vacation from her responsibilities at home, traveled with him to New Orleans, and was now refusing to come home until the state of Louisiana released his body following an autopsy. She insisted they fly home on the same plane, apart but still together.

The words were heard in that moment, but their true meaning would seep in only over time. In the first few days after my father died, I concerned myself with being a good daughter. I stood in line at the wake for hours. The only break I took was to sign my father’s guest book. It didn’t seem fair that his line of condolence offerers was out the door and down the street when the little old lady laid out next door had only a handful of mourners, so I signed her book too.

At the church, I wondered if people thought it disrespectful that I wore a beige dress. Paralyzed by grief, not a single family member had taken the time to worry that I had nothing black in my closet. I was a girl who wore bright colors. I paid more attention to how many of my teachers attended the funeral than I did to the reading of



the eulogy. It all seemed like some fantastic play I was acting in. At home, I went through the motions, accepting boxes of doughnuts and tuna casseroles from neighbors. I thanked each person for coming, as if I were hosting a party. At times I found myself consoling them. The tearful stranger who pulled me close, weeping into my hair. The distant relative, whose name I couldn't remember, so choked up she could barely whisper her condolences.

Going back to school one week later, I was a star. I'd become the hot topic in school because I was the girl whose father died. Not because I'd nabbed a leading role in the school musical while my parents were away on his business trip. Oh, how I wished I hadn't waited to tell him. I'd thought my news would be more spectacular if delivered in person, if I told him once he came home.

Back then, I expected that one day my grief would just disappear. I would simply pick up with my carefree life where I'd left off. Of course it didn't happen that way, though it's true that time certainly did heal me.

I had aspirations to attend college for theater arts. My mother suggested a career in healthcare or education. Remaining the dutiful daughter, I complied. So off to nursing school I went. I made friends, chose interesting jobs. Even with the absence of my father a veil over the affair, my wedding was lovely. I longed for him to walk me down the aisle. It was a poor substitute to include him by placing my wedding bouquet at his gravesite the next morning. Still, being newly married to a wonderful man, it truly was a magical time in my life. Fully aware of the cracks in my heart, I could admit I was happy. In short order, I was blessed with two healthy children, and found rewarding work helping others cope with the challenges of family life. Teaching, counseling, and writing about how to forge stronger, more loving bonds between parents and children was my day job. At night I'd say prayers of thanksgiving for my own precious daughter and son.

In Her Own Words

*“I’ve learned—
in living my
literary life—
that there is
happiness after
hurt.”*

Showing others how to nurture healthy, happy families became my mission. And for a time, all of it was enough.

In the years since my father’s death, I’ve laughed often and loved much, but I’ve been forever changed too. I understand the woman who panics when her husband is twenty minutes late coming home from work. I know what it feels like to be gripped by fear at the sound of a phone ringing in the middle of the night, or the fright a mother feels when her child snuffles, wheezes, trips, or falls. I’ve been known to let *what ifs* get the better of me.

I began writing fiction at forty, after my mother’s death stirred up my fear of loss, the stabbing pain of it. Somehow writing to the heart of a story about a grieving woman and a lonely child gave me the chance to sort through things long buried, and to offer hope to others who may be afraid. It became my attempt to comfort those who know loss intimately as I do. The stories I write, each unique in its way, highlight aspects of grief that are universal. While every person’s journey toward healing is deeply personal, we’re all tied to each other in the collective experience of it. At some point, everyone will make its acquaintance.

Like many of my characters, I’ve felt the incredible longing to be whole again, to be the person I was before grief introduced herself to me. Ironically, confronting the feelings, truly making sense of them, and accepting the humanity of the experience through writing about it has made me more whole than running from grief ever could. And because I’ve loved and lost and learned, I’ve made a conscious choice to love honestly and deeply regardless of the reality that I will mourn again. I live in the moment, I tell others what I cherish about them, and I ask for what I need from the people who share their lives with me. I’ve learned—in living my literary life—that there is happiness after hurt. I believe that grief, though never welcome, insists on bringing gifts. Writing fiction is my way of offering different versions of redemptive stories, for myself and for others. The strongest message is that there is hope in healing.



Recommended Reading

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Fiction

A MAP OF THE WORLD

Jane Hamilton

An aching drama about one woman's ability to live on after a friend's child dies while in her care.

BEFORE AND AFTER

Rosellen Brown

A family disintegrates, and then finds a way to heal, after a tragedy involving two teens.

ORDINARY PEOPLE

Judith Guest

Following a tragic accident involving the death of his brother, a teenager navigates the new terrain of his shattered family.

THE MERCY OF THIN AIR

Ronlyn Domingue

A haunting novel about a woman trapped in between worlds, trying to come to terms with her own death, and the love she will never have.

A SEPARATE PEACE

John Knowles

A classic story about an adolescent coming to terms with his actions following the death of a friend.

*Keep on
Reading*

Nonfiction

TALKING WITH CHILDREN ABOUT LOSS

Maria Trozzi

A stellar guide to how to help children deal with divorce, death, and other losses in family life.

ON GRIEF AND GRIEVING

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and David Kessler

A must-read guide to understanding one's own grief and supporting loved ones coping with loss.

Dear readers,

As a family-life expert for more than twenty years, there's so much about my work counseling women, teaching parents, and observing children that inspired Life Without Summer.

It's been a thrill for me to attend literary luncheons, bookstores, and libraries to share the story behind writing the novel and to read aloud from its pages. Yet nothing has been more satisfying than sitting down to discuss the novel with my readers. Talking about the choices we make when faced with loss, discussing what really holds relationships together when they're tested, exploring the choices we all have to forgive—I've learned so much. It's my deepest wish that, when you read this story, you will too. I'd love to visit your book club or reading group, either in person, via phone, or online (schedules permitting). Together, we're sure to have a rich conversation about each character's personal journey, along with the universal themes connecting hope and healing ... and so much more.

To contact me, visit my Web site www.LynneGriffin.com and click on Reading Groups.

Thanks,

Lynne Griffin



Reading Group Questions

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1. *Life Without Summer* opens with Tessa replaying the accident in her mind, even though she wasn't there and doesn't know what transpired before or after Abby died. Why does she do this to herself? How does *not knowing* propel the novel forward?
2. Tessa secludes herself at home and in Abby's bed after the accident. Do you think it helps or hurts a grieving person to retreat from the world in this way?
3. Tortured by not knowing who killed her daughter, Tessa gets caught up in trying to find answers to the question, What happened to Abby? She keeps things from Ethan, tracks down repeat offenders, and comes face-to-face with suspects. Are her actions believable to you? How were you able to reconcile that a grieving woman would behave this way?
4. Why is Celia able to help Tessa but not able to take the advice for herself? Why does she find it so hard to deal with her own feelings? Do you think she was always like this? What information does she share in her journal that makes you believe she may or may not have been like this in the early days of her marriage to Harry?
5. Tessa keeps her investigation from Ethan. Celia conceals the story of her past from Alden. Harry lies to Celia, and Ian does too. Can you ever justify lying to family members? And what does it do to trust, particularly in a marriage?
6. According to Tessa, Celia is "wound a little tight." She's at odds with her ex-husband, Harry; she struggles with her relationships with Ian and her present husband, Alden. Did you find it easy or hard to empathize with Celia? Did this change after you heard about her loss?

Reading
Group
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7. Alden is unemotional, inflexible, and self-focused. Why do you think Celia married him?
8. Can you understand Tessa's fear of having another child? Do you think she really cares what other people think about her pregnancy? What do you think she's really afraid of?
9. After Tessa announces she's pregnant, Celia says, "As she spoke—while I listened—I heard her story echo my own, though it rang in a slightly different key." Though Tessa and Celia appear so different from one another, what aspects of their stories are the same?
10. In the novel, Tessa keeps Abby's bedroom untouched and Celia leaves a shelf in her studio exactly as it was ten years ago. What role do the symbols of rooms, and cherished belongings, like Tootsie Rabbit and the birthstone necklace, have in this novel?
11. What details of mourning a loss—erecting a roadside memorial, trying to capture a loved one's scent in clothes, or watching old home movies—can you relate to? In what ways are these helpful ways to grieve? In what ways are they not?
12. Tessa trusts her ability to read people. She believes that when she looks into the eyes of each repeat offender, she'll know who's responsible. And she's certain Celia couldn't have known what happened, or she would've told her. Why is she so convinced of these things? Why do some people trust their instincts, while others so often miss the things others try to tell them?
13. How did you feel when you learned who was responsible for killing Abby? Tessa feels differently—less angry—once she learns who did it along with the actual circumstances of the accident. Do you think you would experience a change of heart?



14. Ethan retreats into his religion to cope. Harry relies on alcohol to contend with his overwhelming loss. Compare and contrast the way men and women deal with grief in the novel.
15. Would you be able to do what Tessa did at the end of the novel? Did Mirielle play any role in Tessa's ability to step outside her own situation?
16. Does knowing the truth play a role in a person's ability to forgive? In your opinion, does Tessa forgive Celia? Or Ian?
17. Told in alternating journal entries, whose story do you think is at the heart of the novel? Tessa's or Celia's? Why?
18. Does the ending leave you with a sense of hope? Looking beyond the novel, what do you imagine happens in the relationship between Tessa and Ethan? Celia and Harry? What happens to Ian?